

## Old-growth forests gain ground

**A federal analysis finds older trees on about 600,000 more acres 10 years after adoption of the Northwest Forest Plan**

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The Northwest's old-growth forests, focus of a national showdown on the environment in the 1980s, are growing back.

About 600,000 more acres of older forest now stand on the west sides of Oregon, Washington and California compared with 10 years ago, according to a new federal analysis of forest growth and logging on public lands.

Whether all those trees qualify as old growth depends on how it is defined. They are not all the ancient giants dripping with moss often pictured on calendars, but they have grown larger than 20 inches in diameter and begun to offer the kind of habitat preferred by species such as the northern spotted owl.

The findings reveal that much larger expanses of the region's prized older forests are growing back than are being cut down or burned in wildfires.

The results, already reviewed by independent scientists, will be presented -- and debated -- starting Tuesday at a Portland conference reviewing the first decade of the Northwest Forest Plan, a 1994 compromise between logging and wildlife protection.

They do not necessarily prove all is well. Forest activists say the environmental loss incurred by logging a mammoth old tree outweighs the gain of many other trees growing a decade older and larger. About four of every five acres of older forest lie in small fragments with limited value to wildlife. Another analysis shows spotted owls in a steady decline despite a sharp slowdown in federal logging.

But the findings do show that cutting of old growth on the 24 million federal acres enveloped by the Northwest Forest Plan has come nearly to a standstill. About 17,300 acres of such forest -- 12,200 acres in Oregon -- were clear-cut over the past decade.

That's less than 1 percent of the older forest left open to logging by the plan and much less logging than the forest plan called for.

"When you think about the area we're talking about at that large scale, it's really a drop in the bucket," said Thomas Spies, a research forester at the U.S. Forest Service's Pacific Northwest Research Station.

But he noted that cutting even small amounts of old growth remains politically volatile. The timber industry argues the plan has not kept its promise, and the Bush administration has pledged to accelerate logging to meet the plan's goals.

Faced with continued lawsuits and protests over old growth, federal agencies have turned instead to thinning younger, often overcrowded plantation forests. Many conservation groups favor such work because it speeds the growth of larger trees important to wildlife.

About 287,000 national forest acres have been thinned in the same area over the past decade, more than 16 times as much as the older forest that was clear-cut, according to Forest Service figures.

Wildfire burned about 101,500 acres of older forest -- more than five times the area that was logged. About three-quarters of that was burned by the 2002 Biscuit Fire in Southwest Oregon, the largest fire in modern Oregon history.

The analysis concludes that severe wildfires in forests that have become overgrown during past decades of firefighting pose an increasing risk to older forest.

It found that about a third of the 24 million acres under the Northwest Forest Plan -- most of it west of the Cascade Range -- fits the broad category of older forest with trees at least 20 inches across. Many of those trees are the successors to those that burned in large fires near the beginning of the last century.

Though they do not tower like old growth hundreds of years old, they support about 80 percent of the same wildlife species, Spies said. As forests grow older, more species move in.

But the larger and older trees become much more rare.

Just one in 10 acres hold trees larger than 30 inches in diameter, with branches forming a many-leveled canopy that shelter a broader array of wildlife. All but 2 percent of those trees are in sections less than 1,000 acres in size.

That reveals the legacy of past logging, said Doug Heiken of the Oregon Natural Resources Council. Federal forests remain millions of acres short of the older stands they need to restore the region's forest ecosystems, he said.

"We must never forget the fact that the timber industry took more than their share of the old growth even after we had pointed out the problems with old-growth logging," he said.

For information on the Northwest Forest Plan conference, go to <http://outreach.cof.orst.edu/nwforestplan>.

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